



A Paradox, a Paradox: Religious Studies and the multiplicity of Jesus Christs

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A most ingenious paradox indeed: that for Jesus Christ to be one he must be many; or, that we do not contradict ourselves if we say there is one Jesus Christ and then say there are many Jesus Christs. This seeming contradiction is a paradox, a seeming contradiction.

Most people, I believe, think that only the proposition 'Jesus Christ is one' can be true, while the second, 'Jesus Christs are many', must be false. They think that when the *Epistle to the Hebrews* (13:8) declares Jesus Christ to be 'the same, yesterday, today and forever' it gives not only the theologically correct view of the matter but the commonsense view as well. 'Everyone knows' that there is only one Jesus of Nazareth, as there is only one John the Baptist. And Christian dogma seems convinced that its god, the Lord Jesus Christ, is one, unique and unchanging.

Quite often I will find myself using the plural forms of the relevant terms or names, i.e., I will speak of 'Jesuses' and 'Christs' and 'Jesus Christs', very much aware that virtually no one uses them. The plurals will sound awkward to us if we live in the presumption that there is only one Jesus.

So a range of 'alternative plurals' (especially in book titles) are in use, e.g., *The Faces of Jesus*, *Portraits of Jesus Christ*, *Images of Jesus*, *Asiatic Aspects of Christ*, *Depictions of Jesus*, and so on.

Such usage, however, suggests that there is someone out there to whom these images or portraits or aspects refer. And yet, all the questing for an original historical Jesus, within or beyond the Gospels, has not produced one. There can be no Life of Jesus Christ. So the images, depictions, faces, *are it!* Religious images and symbols are not empirically referential; that is, they are not images of anything existing outside a confessional religious context or story or faith-world. It is a profoundly important commonplace in religious studies that religions, and the earth's myriad deities, are made and remade by people who, in turn, can be made and re-made by those same religions and gods.

Before proceeding, one could point out that Christianity is built on great paradoxes - on the Incarnation, for example, where God, though defined as not a man, is held to have become one and to have dwelt among us. The Trinity displays another apparent contradiction for God is said to be at once one yet three. Theology

calls such paradoxes 'mysteries'. I simply note that what is a contradiction from the point of view of 'n' dimensions is seen as only a seeming contradiction (a paradox) when 'n plus one' dimensions dawn upon us (or when we look with the eyes of faith).

This paper, however, does not explore Christian paradoxes from within the Christian theological circle. It is not a contribution to conventional theological or christological debate. It looks further afield to a phenomenon of culture and history too little noted, the multiplicity of Christian gods - and the paradox of Jesus Christ as both one and many. I believe that what identifies both Oneness and Multiplicity is the same thing: the Christian Story - the story of Jesus as the Christ - in all its simplicity and fantastic elaboration.

The problem of definition is never settled, says Sykes, it simply reappears in different form throughout Christian history.¹ I believe (a) that it is 'the Christian Story' that 'defines' or identifies the Christian religion (its 'oneness') and (b) that it is 'the Christian Story' that sustains the multiplicity of alternative Jesus Christs in history and culture and in many non-Christian religious traditions. So this paper is an exercise in Religious Studies - historical, descriptive and reflective. It belongs to the empirical study of the worlds of the religions. In this general sense I call it basic Phenomenology of Religion and turn first to identifying and describing some of the world's many Jesus Christs.

1. The Jesus Christs of non-Christian traditions

(a) *The Jesus Christ of Islam.* If Christianity suddenly did not exist, we would still have the Jesus Christ who is alive and well in the world of Islam. This Jesus Christ is one of Islam's great prophets, and Muslims know about him from their sacred book, the *Qur'an* (God's eternal word to them) and from their Traditions (the sayings and deeds of Prophet Muhammad).

As we can easily observe, there are both similarities and differences between the Christian Jesus Christ and the Muslim Jesus Christ. We could say the latter is a transformation or emendation of the story of the former, or that the latter is an abrogation of the former. Either way, the one both is and is not the other. They come out of different contexts or communities or stories and, as I will argue below, what identifies a religious phenomenon is its context or community or the stories woven into them.

¹ Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity*, London, 1984, p. 11.

A Paradox, a Paradox

The following summary of the Islamic 'Life of Jesus Christ' is based on Robson who cites the relevant Qur'anic texts (but see also Wessels, and Martin.)¹

'Jesus was miraculously born of the Virgin Mary, who was sister to Aaron and the daughter of Imran, near the trunk of a palm tree. The Jews charged the Virgin with being unchaste; but the babe, speaking from his cradle, vindicated his mother's honour.

Jesus performed miracles, giving life to the clay figure of a bird, healing the blind, curing the leper, and quickening the dead ... Jesus was especially commissioned as the Apostle or Prophet of God to confirm the Law (Moses) and reveal the Gospel. He proclaimed his mission with many manifest signs, being strengthened by the Holy Spirit. He foretold the advent of another prophet whose name should be Ahmad (Muhammad).

The Jews intended to crucify Jesus, but God deceived them for they did not crucify Jesus but only his likeness. He is now in one of the stages of celestial bliss. After he left this earth, his disciples disputed amongst themselves, some calling him a god and making him one of a trinity of 'the Father, the Mother and the Son'. But this is 'a monstrous idea' for God is One only.

Jesus will come again at the last day and will slay Antichrist, kill all the swine, break the Cross, and remove the poll tax from the infidels. He will then reign as a just king for 45 years, marry, have children, and die and be buried near Muhammad at al-Madinah, between the graves of Abu Bakr and 'Umar. (The *Qur'an* has no definite teaching here but Traditions have.)'

So the Muslim Jesus is not God or a god but a man, a prophet and apostle of very great dignity. He was Virgin born and was a miracle-worker. He was not 'crucified, dead and buried' (hence no Atonement in Islam) but he is alive for evermore interceding from heaven for his people.

(b) *The Jesus Christs of Judaism.* Turning to the Jewish tradition we find there have been - and still are - two dominant Jesuses. For brief and vivid descriptions see Martin, Pelikan and Wessels.² One is a terrible Jesus, a Jesus feared by the Jews, a Jesus who stands behind centuries of Christian hatred and persecution of the Jewish people. This Jesus has fueled almost 2,000 years of Christian anti-semitism.

¹ James Robson, *Christ in Islam*, London, 1929. Anton Wessels, *Images of Jesus*, 1990. Dutch Ed. 1986, pp. 38-56. Malachi Martin, *Jesus Now*, 1975, pp. 39-45.

² Martin *op. cit.*, pp. 38-45. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, New Haven, 1985, pp. 9-20. Wessels *op. cit.*, pp. 21-37.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

For the Jews he was the arch-enemy, a deceiver, a Roman puppet, a liar, a thief, a traitor. Wessels quotes Clemens Thoma: 'Christians have torn Jesus from the soil of Israel. They have de-Judaized, uprooted, alienated, Hellenized and Europeanized him.'¹

However, the other Jewish Jesus is radically different. He is a young Galilean, the peasant son of a peasant woman, the carpenter of Nazareth, the rabbi (teacher), the prophet, the miracle-worker who is recognised by many Jews as one of their own. He is not the Messiah and not divine so he is not a Christian Jesus Christ but he is a thoroughly Jewish Jesus.

These two very different Jewish Jesuses are still alive and active: the one is a terrible creature in league with Satan, the other is a great rabbi-prophet at whose feet both Jew and Christian may sit as brother and sister.

(c) *The Jesus Christs of Africa, Latin America and Asia.* From the fifteenth century on, writes Wessels, 'a brutal imperialism transmitted "the colonial Christ" from Europe to Africa, the Americas and Asia. In such colonies the message, the image of Jesus, was 'turned into its opposite'.²

For example, Wessels describes *the Spanish Christ* who came to Latin America 'as an infant in his mother's arms and as a corpse on his mother's lap.' The mother presides over his 'helpless childhood and tragic fate'. 'He came as Lord of Death and of the life which is to be; she came as Sovereign Lady of the life that now is.'³ Absent from this Spanish colonial Jesus Christ is the whole (Gospel) story of his life. 'He appears almost exclusively in two dramatic roles - the role of the infant in his mother's arms, and the role of a suffering and bleeding victim. It is the picture of a Christ who was born and died, but who never lived'.⁴ The risen Christ and the historical Jesus are only dimly present.

Against this background, the Liberation theology of Latin America presents Jesus Christ the Liberator and gives priority to the historical Jesus over the Christ of faith.⁵ The historical Jesus - i.e., his entire active life, everything he did and said during his public

¹ Wessels *op. cit.*, p. 22.

² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 69 quoting J. A. MacKay, *The Other Spanish Christ*, New York, 1932 p. 30.

⁴ MacKay *op. cit.*, p. 102.

⁵ Boff in Wessels, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

A Paradox, a Paradox

ministry in the concrete historical situation of the first century - is brought to centre stage to nourish the life of discipleship.¹

Another contrast appeared when Africa and North America saw the emergence of Black and White Jesus Christs. Western white men had created, in their own image, 'a Western white Jesus, an Arianised Christ', a Christ who has a white skin, wavy brown hair and even blue eyes. Blacks have counterposed to this a Black Messiah with big lips and kinky hair, an oppressed and murdered God who identifies with the oppressed of every race and nation.²

A number of 'authentically African' Christs have emerged, especially from the Independent churches. One Christ, for example, appears as the great or greatest Chieftain who takes his place with the Ancestors. Another Christ is a healing *nganga* or medicine-man. This is seen as 'the paradigm par excellence for an African Christology'. 'The *nganga* is transformed into Christ and Christ is transformed into *nganga*.'³

Interestingly, when Wessels explores the 'images of Jesus' in India he decides they are 'too numerous for us to mention'.⁴ It is also a daunting task to identify and describe the Christs of other times and places, so let's accept some help.

2. Surveying some Surveys of Jesus Christs

Several relatively recent books have offered descriptive overviews of selected Jesus figures, past and present. I cannot explore them in detail here but I will name these deities and offer some brief background comment to document graphically the great multiplicity of the world's Jesus figures.

(a) Anton Wessels, in his *Images of Jesus* offers interesting documentation of the claim that 'Jesus has been depicted in many different ways all over the world',⁵ He begins by looking at 'the changing portraits of Jesus in European art down through the ages, from the youthful shepherd through the conquering emperor to the suffering and dying Christ.' As well as depicting European Christs, Wessels moves beyond them to describe Jewish, African, Black

¹ *Loc. cit.*

² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

American and Latin American Christs and the Christs of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism.

Early in his work Wessels reminds us that we have no accurate physical description of Jesus Christ. From the beginning he was represented only symbolically or allegorically - as the fish, the lamb, the alpha and omega, the cross. When depictions of Jesus in human form did appear there was preference for the figure of the Good Shepherd who appears (from the third and fourth centuries) as 'a good looking young Roman patrician wearing the upper-class clothes of that time'.¹ We should especially note Wessels later comment that 'In the fifteenth century Jesus is portrayed as a man existing in the historical environment of the artist',² suggesting that art may often function as a mirror as well as a window.

Wessels asks critically whether Jesus has been betrayed as well as portrayed by his images. Which, he wonders, are the authentic images? Using the names 'Jesus' and 'Christ' interchangeably, Wessels seems to be assuming some single, original Jesus-Christ-himself with which to compare our images.

(b) Jaroslav Pelikan's *Jesus through the Centuries* focusses on the place of Jesus in the history of culture. Pelikan argues that 'Jesus of Nazareth' has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries. He underscores the multiplicity of Jesuses in history, arguing that 'each age has created Jesus in its own image, finding its own thoughts in Jesus, and discovering in his life and teachings the answers to fundamental questions of human existence and destiny'.³

Pelikan studies the images of Jesus cherished by successive ages - from rabbi in the first century to universal man in the Renaissance to liberator in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'. He devotes chapters to Jesus Christs as different as Jesus the Monk and Jesus the Mystic Lover, and suggests that the way a particular age depicts Jesus is an 'essential key to understanding that age'.⁴

In all, Pelikan presents eighteen images of Jesus affecting culture, cultural incarnations of Jesus Christ through nineteen centuries. He concludes that 'Jesus now belongs to the whole of humanity.' But I would add that in order to so belong, this same Jesus must also be many.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³ Pelikan, *op. cit.*, from the Jacket.

⁴ *Loc. cit.*

A Paradox, a Paradox

(c) Malachi Martin's *Jesus Now* is an extravagant and at times manic discussion of some twenty-five of the 'Jesus figures' of history.¹ He begins with two Non-Christian Jesus Figures (Jesus Jew from about 50 AD, and Jesus Muslim from about 7th C AD). These are followed by 'some great historical Jesus Figures from c. 4th century AD', e.g., Jesus Caesar, Jesus Monk, Jesus Pantocrator, Jesus Doctor, Jesus Torquemada, and Jesus Protestant from AD 1521.

Turning to the last three hundred years, Martin presents some 19th Century Jesus Figures 'for the Emotional Man', e.g., Jesus Jehovah's Witness, Jesus Christian Scientist, Jesus Pentecostalist and Jesus Yogi. Then from the 18th Century Martin offers Jesus Figures 'for the Reasonable Man', e.g., Jesus Apollo, Jesus Prometheus, Jesus One-of-the-boys. Lastly, there are Jesus Figures 'for the 20th Century Social Liberationist', e.g., Jesus Mystic Gun, Jesus Black, Jesus Femina, Jesus Gay, Jesus Christsuperstar, Jesus Take-My-Marbles-and-Etc. And through it all, lurks the Anti-Jesus Figure Satan.

(d) Our last selection, Frederick Buechner's *The Faces of Jesus* will serve as a transition from this section ('sampling the evidence') to the next ('searching for the criteria').² Buechner, in his familiar blend of piety and poetry and perplexity, has produced an essay, an extended homily, a series of meditations on the life of Jesus 'as seen through the eyes of countless painters, sculptors and artisans from early Christian to modern times' and from four continents.

The text is accompanied by 150 colour illustrations, so that both word and image retell the life of Jesus in six episodes: Annunciation, Nativity, Ministry, Last Supper, Crucifixion and Resurrection. The illustrations are vivid examples of what is by now a familiar observation, namely, that all such imaging is clearly and properly conditioned by the artist's taste and provenance. Let just a few examples make the point.

For one artist, the *Annunciation* is to a Mary seated on a Gothic throne (Plate 11). For another it is to Mary relaxing with a book in a Flemish Drawing room (Plate 16). Here is an ivory *Madonna and Child* from China (Plate 26). Mary's eyes are aslant, her cheeks are round and full, her eyebrows are two perfect semi-circles on her globed forehead. She is Kwan Yin, the Chinese Goddess of Mercy. Her halo petals out like a lotus. The Christ-Child she holds is a Chinese Buddha, plump and inscrutable and, with one hand on his knee and his ankles crossed, at peace.

¹ Martin *passim*.

² Frederick Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus*, New York, 1974.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

Nativity in Africa (Plate 27) means that Mary has her halo ribbed like the parasol over the head of a Congo King. The head of her black and holy child, Jesus, is covered with tight black wool. *Nativity in Korea* (Plate 29) means that Jesus and Mary are dressed in silk kimonos, and the dove of the Holy Ghost has become a pet white bird perched on Jesus' finger.

Of the last great episode, the sufferings of Jesus, Buechner writes, 'there is nothing that occurred during the last few hours of Jesus' life, and nothing that the mind of faith can imagine having occurred, that has not been the subject of endless conjecture and innumerable works of art'¹ - perhaps reflecting the sadist in all of us, our fascination with torture, pain and death.

3. Resolving the Paradox

I have tried to show that the history and phenomenology of religion provide overwhelming empirical evidence of innumerable alternative Christian gods named Jesus or Christ or Jesus Christ. I have included Jesus Christs of non-European as well as European cultures and the Christs of world religions other than Christianity.

By the same token, many Jesus Christs are now dead gods because their worshippers have deserted them or have themselves disappeared from the pages of history.

But those who still live in the hearts and minds of millions of their devotees and in their beloved communities, while sharing family resemblances with others, are often strikingly distinctive, telling different (Christian) stories, contradicting each other about women and the priesthood, sanctioning different activities, preferring different music and church architecture and biblical texts and ritual practices, and expressions of sexuality, and so forth.

So how can we be sure that gods nominated as Jesus Christs really are Jesus Christs and not distortions or caricatures? How can we tell which is a faithful portrayal and which a betrayal?

(a) *Gospel Story as Criterion.* Empirical research into religious phenomena shows us that Christians do not have a single, homogeneous image of Christ. And yet there is a sense in which we all do have such an image: we simply turn to the Gospels and their Story with its central character and we have it - an image of Jesus Christ that is unchanging through the centuries, unique, normative,

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

A Paradox, a Paradox

and the same for East and West. The Gospel book is there, palpable, physical, original, privileged, age-less.

(b) *The event on which Christianity is based: Jesus as the Christ.* Reduced to its simplest form, writes Tillich, the central story of the Gospel is the statement that the man Jesus is the Christ, an event that first took place at Caesarea Philippi. Tillich insists that

Christian preaching and teaching must continually re-emphasize the paradox that the man Jesus is called the Christ - a paradox which is often drowned in the liturgical and homiletical use of 'Jesus Christ' as a proper name. 'Jesus Christ' means - originally, essentially, and permanently - 'Jesus who is the Christ'. *The unity of this man of Nazareth and this mythological figure creates the event upon which Christianity is based.*¹

Others see the *resurrection* as the moment when Christianity was born, arguing that it was then that Jesus with his faith became the object of faith. It was then that the Proclaimer became the Proclaimed. The earthly Jesus before the resurrection and the Christ proclaimed by the apostolic church belong together; they are the one Jesus Christ.²

(c) *The centrality of the Gospels, East and West.* Eastern Orthodox theologian and ecumenist Nikos A. Nissiotis speaks out of his tradition when he writes:

From ancient times the Church has considered the Gospels to be the pivotal writings of the whole Bible. Indeed, they provide the link backwards with the Old Testament prophecy and the Torah, for they portray their fulfillment in Christ, and also forwards for they constitute the commencement of the new eras of the church, of her mission and theology. Although, in their present form, they were written later than some of the other books of the New Testament, they do, in reality, play this double role at the centre of the Bible, because they deal directly with the person of Christ. It is for this reason that the four gospels are singled out

¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, Chicago, 1957, ch. 26.

² Klaas Runia, *The Present-day Christological Debate*, Leicester, England, 1984, pp. 30f.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

as one book as a distinctive unit which represents the 'Evangelion' of Christ.¹

Nissiotis points to the four gospels as 'the pivotal biblical texts for the theology, worship and mission of the Church'.² He explains: by the term 'Gospel' I mean the Evangelion, the solemn liturgical book containing just the four Gospels...found on the altar in orthodox temples'.³

Orthodox scholars, are well aware of the critical findings of modern scholarship including the important differences between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel, but they still insist that 'in no essential point' is there a real opposition between the gospels'. 'All four gospels together compose, though from different angles, the one Gospel of Christ'.⁴ The differences between them 'do not touch and question the one and central subject matter, viz., the person of Jesus as the prophet, the Messiah and the incarnate Son of God'.⁵ All four Gospels testify that 'the incarnate Son of God, is the centre, the backbone, and the heart of one undivided Gospel message'.⁶

So the Gospel text is supreme, irreplaceable and unchanging, like the score of a symphony or the texts of Shakespeare's plays. It is the abiding text on which all interpretations must be based if they are to lay claim to being an authentic part of the Christian Story. And this point is made *despite* Tertullian (2nd century) who concluded that there was no use arguing on the ground of Scripture, since there is always some method of interpretation by which a text can be made to yield up the meaning one wants.

The Orthodox express the centrality of the Gospel symbolically and visually when, in their liturgy, the priest takes the Gospel from the altar, comes out from the side door of the sanctuary and proceeds solemnly through the congregation showing the Evangelion to the faithful by lifting it up above his head and inviting them to 'attend'.⁷

¹ Nikos A. Nissiotis, 'The Gospels in the Faith and Life of the Church', in Donald G. Miller and D. Y. Hadidian (eds), *Jesus and Man's Hope*, pp. 119-140, p. 123.

² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

A Paradox, a Paradox

Donald Senior makes the point for the West - that the world's Jesus Christs must be derived from and validated by the Jesus Christ in the Gospels:

The necessity of deepening and sharpening our faith portrait of Jesus points to the gospels. Here every Christian's image of Jesus must find its validation. Not everything that must be said about Jesus and about genuine Christian life is found in the gospels. But the source of every thing we know about Jesus and the test of genuineness for every aspect of Christian life and teaching ultimately are in the gospels. The New Testament - and the gospels in particular - is the lifeline that links Jesus of Nazareth with people of every age who claim to be his disciples.¹

In his *Interpreting the New Testament*, James L. Price writes:

The picture of Jesus which many people envisage is a composite one made up of traits drawn from all four Gospels. In this tendency there is reflected a theologically sound instinct. None of the Gospels does full justice to the person of the Christ; in all of them the one Lord is proclaimed.²

(d) *The elaboration of the Story.* Over the centuries the great religious themes of the Gospel have been endlessly elaborated. Buechner (above) listed Annunciation, Nativity, Ministry, Last Supper, Crucifixion and Resurrection, but there are dozens of other themes and sub-themes. In the Middle Ages we find at Chartres cathedral 'a magnificent effort to embrace the whole of the universe. Its ten thousand figures in glass or in stonework form a whole unequalled in Europe'.³

Were we to take the Gothic cathedral as our model of Christian Art, writes Male, it would follow that almost any topic or person or scene drawn from Biblical tradition or Christian history or any subject matter from the saints and their legends to pagan life or secular learning can find a place in the Medieval world view, and in the art of that great Age of Faith.⁴

¹ Donald Senior, *Jesus: a Gospel Portrait*, New York, 1992, (New Revised Edition), p. 10.

² James L. Price, *Interpreting the New Testament*, 1961.

³ Emile Male, *The Gothic Image, Religious Art in France in the Thirteenth Century*, 1961 (First published, 1913), p. 390.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

The Christ does not stand alone. In Gothic art he is at the centre of an entire universe peopled with disciples, apostles, saints and martyrs, along with figures and scenes from the Old Testament and the New Testament and the Apocrypha. The ordering of subjects was determined by the Church. The artist was the submissive interpreter.¹

So there is only one Jesus Christ, (the unchanging and normative Jesus Christ of the New Testament but especially of the Gospels) and at the same time there are many Jesus Christs who will identify themselves as Christian by showing their relation to Christ and the Gospel, no matter how tenuous. The authenticity of this relationship is a 'judgement call' by Christian communities and by Religious Studies scholars (historians and phenomenologists), for Christ the one and Christs the many depend upon each other. John A. T. Robinson has spoken to our paradox thus:

For Jesus Christ to be the *same* yesterday, today and for ever, he has to be a contemporary of every generation, and therefore different for (people) of every generation and life-style. He must be *their* Christ. He must be their *Christ*. To be one Jesus Christ must be many.

A paradox, a most ingenious paradox.²

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

² With apologies to Gilbert and Sullivan's Pirates.